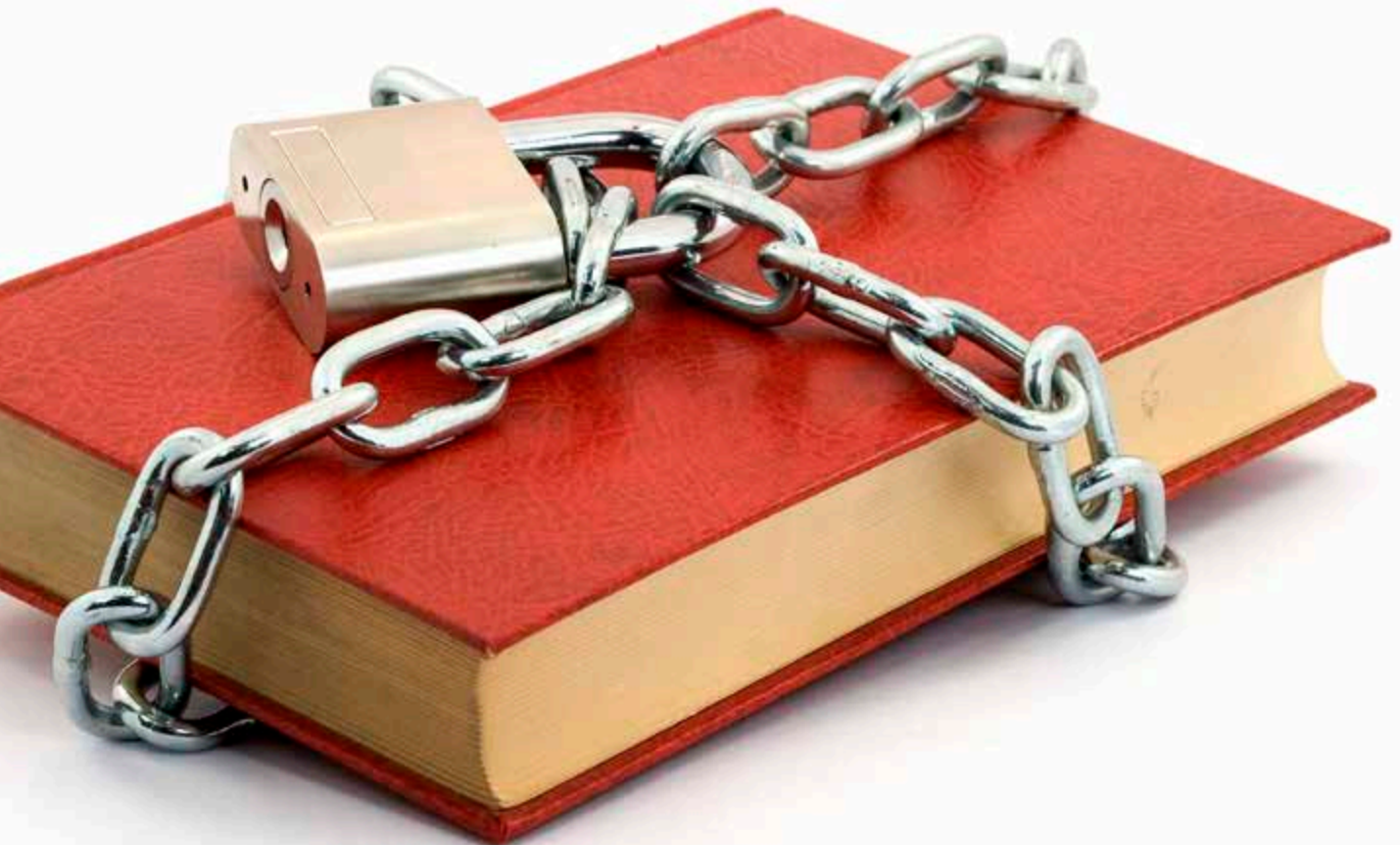


FEATURE

# ACCESS TO INFORMATION

## Perspectives of a Superintendent and a School Board Member

**Introduction by Helen Adams**



School librarians often wonder whether school superintendents and school board members understand and support intellectual freedom for students in K–12 schools. In this unique article, an administrator and a school board member discuss their thoughts and the actions they took to support access to information in the face of formal challenges to school library resources. Share their stories with your administrators and school board members when you talk with them about intellectual freedom.

## LESSONS LEARNED

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Challenges to books used in schools, removal of books from libraries, and other forms of censorship are not new. Thirty-eight years' experience as a principal and superintendent presented me with numerous opportunities to respond to challenges. The challenges usually came from a parent regarding a required reading or a library book with "dirty" words. Responses to these challenges occurred at the building level and followed established guidelines such as asking the challenger to put the complaint in writing and answer a series of questions. Sometimes an alternative assignment was provided for classroom work, but library books were never removed.

### A Three-Book Challenge

My ideas about how these issues are resolved expanded in 2008 when more than twenty people showed up at a board meeting with a petition calling for the removal of three books from the school library: *Revolutionary Voices*, *Love and Sex*, and *The Full Spectrum*. All three deal with learning about love from an LGBT perspective. Many in the group addressed the school board with great shows of indignation that the books were in the school library where they could harm the minds of young people. Debates in open forums frequently encourage people to "perform" and take positions that leave no room for compromise. The school board eventually referred the complaint to me as superintendent. My first step was to begin a formal process by asking the group to complete a complaint form and attach their names and petition to

the complaint. This provided time to work with the head librarian to develop a process for responding to the complaint.

### Lessons Learned

Along the way, we learned several lessons. First, school board meetings previously had been attended by a few people who normally just observed the proceedings. As a result, no policies or procedures were in place to limit or focus discussion. We needed a documented procedure for keeping discussions on point. Second, when the head librarian and I started

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looking at policies regarding forms and processes for handling complaints, we discovered they were not in the district policy manual. The head librarian remembered a process for handling complaints, and she did find procedures recommended by ALA a number of years ago. It is easy to assume things are in place until you are confronted by an issue. A periodic review and updating of policies would have been helpful to us.

### Our Process

The complaint form provided the school librarian and me with a place to start. The completed form did not identify the group as an organization. Responses on the form indicated that members of the group had not read the books nor did they cite specific complaints about each book. With the help of other library staff members, we began to research the group. We quickly learned that it was a local branch of 9/12-ers following Glenn Beck's proposals for taking back control of America. The 9/12 group maintained an open website from which we learned their plans to approach all local high schools.

We followed public e-mails back to the national organizations that were providing them with direction. Two of those national organizations were anti-LGBT, a circumstance that explained why the three books in question were chosen. We discovered members of the 9/12 group were working behind the scenes to influence some of the individual board members.

With the help of the district's law firm, we started a thorough search of the law and found guidance about what could be challenged, who could or couldn't challenge, and who was responsible for deciding local norms and values. For example, it became clear that challenges could not be made for political reasons, and it appeared that the 9/12 organization met the definition of being a political group with a political agenda. We researched all three books, gathering reviews and other information. Everything we learned was placed into files.

At the next board meeting, the school board approved my recommendation to form a committee to do a thorough review of the books and report back to

the school board. A committee of seven represented all stakeholders, including a member of the 9/12 group. Sufficient books for all committee members to read were borrowed from local libraries. We gave each committee member a binder, two inches thick, containing the material we gathered as described above. The binders were also shared with other local librarians. The committee discussions covered a variety of opinions, which people shared in a professional manner. The committee completed an honest review that met legal requirements and eliminated further public posturing. The recommendation to the school board was to remove one of the three books, which the board approved with little further controversy.

### Conclusion

I believe we accomplished a great deal by following our process. Books about the LGBT experience as a young adult are still in the library and available to all students. Our research prepared other local schools for possible challenges by the group. The ACLU did not challenge the removal of the third book. Politics and emotions were replaced with an informed base of knowledge. As a general practice, I met regularly with a select group of students about controversies affecting the school. Meeting with the students usually left me impressed with their ability to see things with a unique perspective. A student said during the "challenge" discussion, "You know this is much ado about nothing. It is easy to get a copy of any book we want to read."



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## THE SIMPSONS VS. THE FREEDOM TO READ: A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE

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### Intellectual Freedom Put to the Test

Is it possible for politics to coexist peacefully with intellectual freedom? More to the point, can a comic book survive the clash of social, political, and moral tastes among members of an elected school board? The answer is *yes*, but not without a lot of discussion, research, and education.

The school year had just begun. Working its way up from one of our middle schools was a complaint from a parent about a book brought home by her sixth-grade son. She'd talked to the school librarian and the school principal about her concerns but wasn't satisfied. She was advised that the next step was

to submit a written request for reconsideration of library materials to our educational specialist for library services. *Simpsons Comics Belly Buster* by Matt Groening, in this mom's opinion, had no redeeming qualities; it was crude overall, not age appropriate, and might encourage young people to drink, be violent, and use poor judgment. Assigned to our library materials review committee, this graphic novel was to be read and reviewed by a panel of selected parents, administrators, teachers, and school librarians. I served as the designated school board member.

It is one thing to understand the principle of intellectual freedom and quite another to be put to the test. The first obstacle I had to overcome was my distaste for *The Simpsons* in general. Through committee discussion, I was surprised to learn that the series had won dozens of awards, but more importantly, I was reminded that the book was satirical and served to spur discussions on many aspects of the human condition. Because of the range of maturity levels at middle school, the book also provided an excellent opportunity to encourage reluctant readers to learn to think critically.

When our complainant addressed the committee, she demanded that the book be pulled from school library shelves, asked that the person responsible for approving the book be chastised, and stated her disgust that her tax dollars had gone to purchase "this trash." In response to her concerns, committee members patiently and objectively discussed freedom of choice and indicated that

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it was a parent's right to determine what was appropriate for his or her own child. When gently asked if she felt that children actually would try to act out what they had read, the parent grudgingly shared that "most children do know this is wrong; I mean, of course they do." In the end, the committee's recommendation to the superintendent was to keep the book on the school library shelves.

Concurring with the committee's decision, the superintendent placed the recommendation on the docket for the next school board meeting. When the item came up for discussion and vote, our educational specialist for library services got up and began to explain that the book under consideration was a graphic novel, meaning that it was done in a comic-strip format. Before she could complete her explanation, one school board member exclaimed, "Well, you're right there. It certainly is graphic, and in the wrong way!" What followed was a cacophony of complaints motivated primarily by the board members' disagreement with the ideas presented in the book because they found them personally offensive. The board seemed determined to go against

the committee's decision and direct that the book be pulled from library shelves, despite counterpoint arguments from our library specialist and me. Finally, our school board attorney asked that the board delay its decision until the next meeting to allow her time to provide the board with additional information.

At this time, the school board consisted of several members who had not yet dealt with a challenged book. Because our meetings are recorded, all comments made are accessible. Our attorney took these things into consideration, and she provided the board with an excellent overview of a relevant United States Supreme Court decision *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982). She pointed out that while the board members have the right to determine educational suitability, they do not have the right to deny access based on disagreement with the ideas in the book. She felt that the comments already on record plus the recommendation of the committee to retain the book would expose the board to a constitutional challenge should the final decision be to remove the book.

At the next meeting, the board upheld the committee's decision.

Politicians (and that is what school board members are) strive to keep their constituents happy and appeal to their base. They want to be re-elected or re-appointed. They sometimes come with an agenda that has little to do with rationality. They often get swept up in the emotions of the moment and do not think long-term. When they say, "Reasonable people would agree...", often they are about to insert whatever it is that they, personally, find objectionable. They may be prone to making inappropriate decisions.



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CHOOSE YOUR REVIEW COMMITTEE  
MEMBERS CAREFULLY AND  
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### What Is a School Librarian to Do?

The first lines of defense are a well-written policy and thorough guidelines for selection of library materials and reconsideration of challenged materials. Choose your review committee members carefully and educate them well. Members who have not read the Library Bill of Rights or who do not understand the concept of intellectual freedom will be liabilities. Tread very carefully on the slippery slope of requiring parental notification about potentially controversial materials. This requirement may become a form of subjective censorship that likely will result in unequal application of the policy and also may discourage the use of valuable educational materials. Remember that parents have the absolute right to choose materials appropriate for their own child, but not what is appropriate for all children.

With knowledge, tact, skill, and preparation, you can ensure that politics and intellectual freedom remain on friendly terms.



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*(VA) Public Schools. She is a friend of the Virginia Association of School Librarians. She received the Award of Distinction from the Virginia School Boards Association Academy, the Virginia State PTA President's Honor Award, and Virginia State PTA Honorary Life Membership.*

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